

Everyone has a book inside them

My experience of publishing a book

Helen Zink 24 July 2024 (one month before publication)

That may be true.
But getting it out
and getting it
published is a whole
other journey!

Exactly two years have passed since the concept of my book was scribbled on a scrap of paper (which I still have). Although a speedy process compared with horror stories I have heard, it was not without challenge. David Clutterbuck's guide to writing a book includes a chapter called "Do you have what it takes...?" He questions prospective authors about their rationale, resilience, ability and tenacity. I now have first-hand understanding of what he means.

to be, how the story evolved, the publishing process, and what I discovered about myself along the way.

What I learnt about the story

I fleshed out the initial concept into a ten-page document, outlining the main premise – telling the same story from five different perspectives. I tested my thinking with others, and I recall Michael, the team leader, saying at the time, "I'm not sure your concept will work – I'm not sure there will be enough difference in our points of view." I disagreed; I was confident there was meat on the bones of this story. And I was right!

Obviously, I was cognisant of my own version of events, but I was not fully aware of others' perspectives until I read their input. Those representing the organisation surprised me in particular, as they spoke passionately of their lack of involvement and how things could have played out differently.

Although input from the team and Michael was less surprising, the opportunity to reflect again while contributing to the book provided additional insight for them and for me.

The second part of the book, which focuses on comparing perspectives, was not well thought through. It evolved through writing and rewriting until I was comfortable there was something worth reading.

Because I linked practice with theory throughout, I was able to both review some familiar ideas and explore some other, less familiar theory. Writing content further stimulated my thinking and I made many more connections with theory than I had planned.

I would not do anything differently if I had the opportunity to re-write the story. Some parts were planned in advance, and others were not, instead evolving as I worked on them. That evolution would not have been possible before.

What I learnt about writing

I never set out to write a book, and I also know I did not enjoy writing, nor did I think I was good at it. Writing has always been a necessary evil for me, a requirement to achieve a greater goal. The same was true of this project – I was motivated by the belief that the story was worth sharing.

So how did I endure it? In the movies, writers go on retreats, so I thought I would try the same. I allocated specific time in my diary and I "went bush" one week per month, somewhere quiet, with nice scenery, no internet, and sometimes no electricity. It worked! For eight months I

switched into writing mode during these allocated weeks. The 90,000-word first draft seemed to flow out without too much pain.

In many ways, the first draft was a cathartic experience. That first draft was raw and unfiltered, and came with many tears and frustration as I relived events.

By the second, more censored draft, emotion seemed to have dissipated. It was like the story was an object, separate from me as a person. Now, as the physical book is being printed, it feels even more detached.

The most challenging part of the writing process came after the second draft – peer feedback. Each chapter went to at least two reviewers, and I collected feedback from around ten people. I was also working with three contributing authors, resulting in thirteen sets of feedback in all. Some feedback was communicated constructively, some was downright brutal, and, of course, all thirteen parties had different opinions on almost everything.

I was overwhelmed, literally frozen. I recall sitting in front of my computer, staring at the manuscript on the screen. I am not sure how long I did this for – perhaps two weeks, maybe longer?

My return to reality was sparked by a conversation with Tammy, my coach supervisor and contributing author. She gave me the pep talk I needed at just the right time, saying something like, “At the end of the day, it’s your name on this thing. You have to back yourself. Take on the feedback you think is relevant, and ignore rest.” I took her advice.

If I had the opportunity to re-do the writing process, I would ask peers for feedback earlier. I do not regret what I went through, but earlier input may have saved time and emotional pain.

As I worked on the third draft, incorporating peer feedback, I knew I had publishing deadlines to meet. I was completely consumed by the process at this point, and it became my entire life – I ate, slept and breathed it.

Then, relief. Once the full manuscript was submitted to the publishers, I crashed. I was done – both physically and mentally exhausted. I also suffered from some kind of unexpected post-project funk - a feeling of loss, emptiness, and I was a little depressed. It was an extremely strange sensation.

Fortunately, the next steps in the process, which lasted several months, involved minor edits and to-ing and fro-ing with the publishers. This phase of the project was process rather than thinking, and by the time I had the final version of the manuscript to check, my energy had returned.

What I learnt about publishing

Prior to this project, I was a publishing novice. My only previous experience involved small contributions to other authors’ work.

The first decision I made was whether to self-publish or work with a “real” publisher. I discounted self-publishing, as to me it felt like a consolation prize.

I did some research, approached six “real” publishers, and received three positive offers within weeks. I could not believe it! As a first-time author, I was not expecting that response. My belief that the story was worth sharing was echoed by others.

An advantage I had was the ability to write a good proposal. Publishing proposals are very much like a business case, and my many years of experience writing similar documents in a corporate context was good practice.

From the three, I chose Routledge, and working with them felt like a partnership throughout the process. Communication was great, and my many questions as a first-time author were answered promptly and professionally. What I did not appreciate was how many different parties would be involved. Apparently, commissioning editors and production editors are not the same people, and those who actually edited and typeset the manuscript were different again.

From my point of view, the editing process went smoothly, and I am confident my decision to employ my own editor had a significant impact. I know my spelling and grammar skills are not great, so I outsourced.

Next time (if there is a next time), I will be more aware of the format required for files and diagrams, and the permissions process. Knowing this earlier would have saved significant reformatting time.

What I learnt about marketing

Now, exactly one month out from publication, I am in the depths of marketing.

Around six months ago, with the support of a business development consultant, I created an integrated business plan and book marketing plan. The idea is to use the book as leverage to grow brand awareness and my client base.

The publishers have sales and marketing teams who focus on volume of book sales. Their targets are tertiary institutions, coaching professional bodies, and coach training schools. In my marketing plan, the focus is different. I am targeting those who make development intervention decisions within organisations – HR professionals and change managers. They may have some interest in the book, and, more importantly, they might consider partnering with me or employing my services. I learnt a lot about target markets and leverage while working on this.

I am still at the very beginning of the marketing phase, and I am sure I will have more learning to add to this section.

What I learnt about my village

This project felt like a solo effort much of the time. Yet, when I reflect back now, it is clear it never was.

Michael and I created the initial premise. The first draft was crafted from the input of many dozens of people, representing all five perspectives of the story. The peer-review process I mentioned above was a collaborative process, with some chapters going back and forward multiple times.

Michael and I co-authored the leader chapter, and Tammy wrote most of the supervision and support chapter. David wrote the foreword, and professional endorsements were kindly provided by three coaching thought leaders.

No one listed above received payment for their time – they gave it generously in support of me and for the benefit of readers and the profession.

As mentioned above, I had my own editor, who checked the logic, spelling, and grammar of all my work. Then there were the different representatives of Routledge, many of whom I am still working with on an almost daily basis.

I also need to mention the ongoing support from my peers, family and friends throughout the process, especially during times I was frozen or overwhelmed.

Although my name is in the biggest font on the cover, I know it took a village to bring this project to life. This project has reinforced that nothing in life is really a solo effort – nothing!

What I learnt about myself

I have learnt plenty about myself over the last two years, and much is already mentioned above. However, what I have not talked about yet is how this project has reinforced the belief that I can do anything I set my mind to – even something I do not enjoy. By having a clear vision, I was able to keep myself motivated. By collaborating with others, doing research, being curious and open to feedback, leaning on my village, and working hard, I have learnt many things.

Now, as I am on the verge of holding the completed book in my hand, and my attention turns to book reviews, journal articles and speaking gigs, I have mixed emotions – surrealism, pride, relief, and anxiety. Anxiety fuelled by imposter syndrome and discomfort that my name is now out there in the big wide world.

David, apparently, I do “have what it takes to complete a book”. I am a published author.

References

Clutterbuck, D. (2013). *Writing your first book: a practical guide for new authors in management, business or social science*. Wordscapes: Liverpool.

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